

A Reconsideration of Hebrews 6:4-6 in Light of Contextual Studies

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Few passages of the Bible have spawned more diverse opinion that the early verses of Hebrews 6. Bruce Compton describes this passage as “a notorious crux in New Testament interpretation” (1996:135). Mathewson says that it “remains one of the most puzzling and enigmatic for interpreter” (1999). A number of varied and conflicting interpretations have been suggested and the fact that no single one of these has gained an overall acceptance is in itself evidence that this is one of the more misunderstood passages of Scripture.

Most commentators would seem to agree with McKnight’s analysis that focuses the key interpretive issue upon “two central sets of questions: (1) Who are the subjects? Are they genuine believers? Or, are they false or pretentious believers? and (2) What is the sin these subjects are in danger of committing? Is it apostasy? Is it ‘the sin unto death?’ Or, is it a sin which, though leading to the heaviest discipline of the Lord, does not finally exclude a person from God’s presence?” (1992:27). An examination of these two questions is therefore in order. A survey of the popular interpretations of this passage reveal the following:

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| Saved persons who are subsequently lost | Lenski and Arminians in general teach that one can be saved and then lose that salvation. The problem is that this passage would say it is subsequently impossible for such a person to be saved again. | |
| Professed believers who have never really been saved | Phenomenological-False Believer View | These are not true believers and can therefore fall away from their proximity to the true faith. |
| | Phenomenological-True Believer View | These look on the outside to be true believers and are outwardly indistinguishable from false believers. |
| Saved persons who backslide | Charles Ryrie taught that this meant a believer could not start over again but must continue his spiritual walk from where he found himself. | |

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| Hypothetical situation | Spurgeon, Westcott, and Kent teach it is a warning of what could hypothetically take place if one were able to fall away. The warnings are real, but the sin against which is warned cannot actually be committed since true believers cannot fall away. |
| Covenant Community View | Individuals are not in view; this is a warning against the Hebrew covenant community. |

These conflicting interpretations have a tendency toward polarization based upon the theological presuppositions of their adherents. Spurgeon makes this observation of those within his own theological camp:

“If you read Dr. Gill, Dr. Owen, and almost all the eminent Calvinistic writers, they all of them assert that these persons are not Christians. They say, that enough is said here to represent a man who is a Christian externally, but not enough to give the portrait of a true believer. Now, it strikes me they would not have said this if they had had some doctrine to uphold; for a child, reading this passage, would say, that the persons intended by it must be Christians. If the Holy Spirit intended to describe Christians, I do not see that he could have used more explicit terms than there are here. How can a man be said to be enlightened, and to taste of the heavenly gift, and to be made partaker of the Holy Ghost, without being a child of God? With all deference to these learned doctors, and I admire and love them all, I humbly conceive that they allowed their judgments to be a little warped when they said that; and I think I shall be able to show that none but true believers are here described” (1856).

Nor is this the only view against which such a charge can be laid. If those of the Calvinist and eternal security persuasion have sought to delegate the references in this passage to unbelievers so as to avoid the perceived theological implications that would be contrary to their theological views, many of those of the Arminian camp have also attempted to soften the weight of the judgment of this passage by either changing the import of that which was described as an impossibility to a mere difficulty or to have it apply, not to the permanent loss of eternal salvation, but to the re-administration of baptism. Even Tertullian, considered an extreme view by all parties, seems to have limited the import of this passage to the adulterer and fornicator (1986:97).

Of special value is Guthrie’s observation that “most discussion of the warnings in Hebrews have greatly neglected the ‘omniscience’ factor. The author admits his lack of knowledge concerning the spiritual state of all those in this community of hearers” (1998:231). If the author of the epistle admits an uncertainty as to the spiritual status of the recipients, indicating that he is hoping for the best but fearing the worst, then we ought to be equally cautious in setting forth any dogmatic conclusion as to the state of those same recipients as well as those who are described in the passage before us.

If it is true that we cannot say with any certainty what was the spiritual state of those described in this epistle, we can at least be sure of their ethnicity, for there is ample evidence to show that the epistle has been appropriately titled to the Hebrews. The recipients of this epistle are Jewish descendants of the children of Israel. Though there has been speculation as to exactly where they were located, whether they were in Jerusalem or Palestine or whether they were from the diaspora in some other part of the world, it is universally acknowledged by all interpreters that the arguments of the epistle are especially relevant to the Jews. More specifically, these were Jews who had come to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah. They had heard the message of Jesus Christ, that He had died for sins and that He rose from the dead. They initially believed this message. In doing so, they had now become targets for persecution. The author speaks of how, after being enlightened, they had endured “a great conflict of sufferings, reproaches, and tribulations (Hebrews 10:32-33), extending even to the seizure of their property (Hebrews 10:34), though this persecution seems not yet to have accelerated to the point of bloodshed (Hebrews 12:4). In the midst of these difficult times, they were now being tempted to leave Christ and to go back to their sacrifices and their religious ceremonies.

McKnight correctly points out that when we look at all of the warning passage of Hebrews together, a picture of the sin against which the readers are being warned becomes clear. It is the sin of apostasy which is in view (1992:26). However, it is not the sort of apostasy that would have led those guilty of its infraction to abandon a faith in God or return to a former paganism. These are Jews and this means the sort of apostasy with which they were being tempted would result in a return to the Old Testament law as a means of approaching God. They were missing the point that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies. These ceremonies and customs all serve as illustrations of His perfect person and work. As a result, they were attempting to return to the infancy of their faith. They were turning back to the Mosaic Law. They were like the baby who wants to again become a fetus.

The book of Hebrews contains five warnings to the Jewish Christian readers. They are warnings to beware of certain spiritual failures.

1. Beware of Neglecting Salvation (2:1-4).
2. Beware of Not Entering into Rest (3:7 - 4:13).
3. Beware of Not going on to Maturity (5:11 - 6:20).
4. Beware of Insulting the Spirit of Grace (10:26-31).
5. Beware of Indifference (12:18-29).

Though these warnings have sometimes been treated as though they were distinct and unrelated to one another, Bruce Compton builds a compelling case for seeing the relationship between these warnings:

Furthermore, the warnings themselves are interrelated since they appear to have the same audience in view, the same underlying problem as the occasion for the warnings, and the same consequences if the warnings are not heeded.

Consequently, they should not be treated in isolation, but synthetically, in order to arrive at a proper interpretation of each (1996:135).

Each of these warnings are given because there is a danger of leaving Jesus. The solution to each of these warnings is to see that Jesus is better. We can see the flow of thought in the following chart:

| Jesus is Better... | | |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| 1:4 | He is better than the Angels | Warning #1: How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation (2:2-4). |
| 3:1 | He is better than Moses | Warning #2: Take care lest any should be falling away from the living God and not enter into His rest (3:12; 4:1; 4:11). |
| 4:3 | He provides a better Rest | |
| 4:14 | He is a better High Priest | Warning #3: Those who have fallen away find it impossible to renew again to repentance (6:4-6). |
| 8:1 | He ministers in a better Sanctuary | |
| 8:6 | He has obtained a better Covenant which has been enacted on better promises | |
| 10:1 | He has offered a better Sacrifice | Warning #4: If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins (10:26-31). |
| 12:1 | He has brought a better City | Warning #5: If those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. (12:25). |

These are all different aspects of the same basic warning. It is a warning against not holding onto Christ. This is simply another way of describing the danger of apostasy, for apostasy, by definition, is to depart from Christ and from Christianity. Indeed, the Greek verb *aphistemi*, from which we derive our English word “apostasy” is used in Hebrews 3:12 when the readers are warned against an “unbelieving heart that falls away from the

living God.” Likewise, the related *apostreho* is used in Hebrews 12:25 where a warning is given to those “who turn away from Him.”

Though not appearing on the chart above, Hebrews 12:15 warns the readers to “see to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.” Though these words have often been taken by casual readers to speak about emotional bitterness, but the context does not allow for such an interpretation. We should instead view these words through the lens of the history of Israel. They are reminiscent of the instance when Moses spoke to the Israelites of the danger of turning away from the Lord to serve the false idols of their neighbors.

Moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); ¹⁸ lest there shall be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood. (Deuteronomy 29:17-18).

The poisonous fruit and wormwood Moses described was the poison of idolatry. Now the danger has come full circle. It is no longer the danger of worshiping idols of wood or stone or silver or gold. Now the danger is of making an idol of the law while turning away from the One to whom the law pointed. They are being tempted to depart from Christianity and to return to their former Judaism. To summarize:

- ♦ They were Jews.
- ♦ They have a heritage that was rooted in religion.
- ♦ They have grown up going to synagogue every week.
- ♦ They have read the Old Testament Scriptures.
- ♦ They have offered sacrifices and offerings to the Lord.

Then they became Christians. They heard the message that Jesus had died for sins and had risen again from the dead. They believed that message and joined the local group of believers which followed the teachings of Jesus. But as persecutions began to arise they began to be tempted to renounce their new found faith. After all, they had been happy when they had been under the spiritual infancy of the Law, even though it is elsewhere likened to a bondage.

So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. ⁴ But when the fulness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, ⁵ in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Galatians 4:3-5).

It is important to note that the language of immaturity used both by Paul in the above passage as well as here in Hebrews does not refer to a believer who has just come to Jesus

as opposed to a believer who has been a Christian for an extended period of time. The reference to childhood speaks of those who were in their former state of Judaism and who approached God through the Old Testament rituals and promises as they awaited the coming of a future Messiah. These rituals are the “weak and worthless elemental things” that can become a place of enslavement to the New Testament believer (Galatians 4:9).

This same language of spiritual infancy carries over to the epistle to the Hebrews as the writer likewise describes a time when the readers were under the “elementary principles of the oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:11). But then the fulness of time had come and Jesus had come and these readers had heard the gospel and had believed. They had taken the solid food of the gospel to replace the previous milk of the promises and types and pictures contained in the Old Covenant. Now that they had come to faith, they had a tremendous advantage over Gentile converts to Christianity, for they already knew the Old Testament Scriptures. In the words of the author of Hebrews, they should have been teachers, but instead, they have come to a place of needing to be taught a true understanding of the central truth of those same Old Testament Scriptures to which they are now seeking to return. They want to return to the Law and the Prophets, but they seem to have forgotten that it is the Law and the Prophets that prophesy of Jesus. They are told, “You have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:12). What are the elementary teachings about Christ? In the context of which this is given, it is the teachings of the Messiah (that is what the word “Christ” means) as seen in the Old Testament. Messiah was seen in an elementary way in the Old Testament, but He is seen in a complete way in the New Testament. This is what Hebrews is all about. The epistle begins with the premise that God spoke at many different times and in many different ways, but in these last days, He spoke by a Son.

These Jews had heard the message of the gospel. They had come to Christ. They had joined the ranks of the Christians. They had pledged themselves to Jesus Christ. But now they are turning away. They are turning back to their former Judaism. They are turning back to their previous religious system and telling themselves that such a departure will be acceptable because it is still the same God. But, in doing this, they are ignoring the oracles of God. They are ignoring the fact that their Old Testament Scriptures which they are trying to return to are the very ones which bear witness of Jesus Christ.

These Jews are likened to babies; they *have come to need milk and not solid food* (5:12). At a time when they should have been teachers, spreading the gospel to others, they needed to be fed the milk of the gospel. The reason they need milk is because milk is crucial at their stage of spiritual development. They need a true understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures and the Law and the priesthood and the tabernacle and the sacrificial system and the way it all points to Jesus. They need to be taught the ABC’s of the Old Testament. At a time when they ought to have been teaching in the Jerusalem Bible College, they needed to go back to spiritual kindergarten.

Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, lest us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, 2 of instruction about washings, and laying on of

hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And this we shall do, if God permits. (Hebrews 6:1-3).

This passage has been greatly misunderstood. It has been taught that this is a call for believers to grow and to mature and to become more knowledgeable in the Scriptures. But such an interpretation is completely at odds with the context. Up to this point, there has been a series of contrasts showing that Jesus is better...

than the angels.

than Moses.

than Joshua.

than the priesthood.

As we come to chapter 6, the contrast still remains. It is a contrast between the elementary teachings about the Christ versus going on to maturity. We tend to think that the “elementary teachings” are the basics of salvation while the “mature” things are some special teachings which transcend salvation. But that isn't so. You never get more mature than the cross. There is nothing deeper than salvation.

When the Hebrew readers are told to “go on to maturity” they are being told to hold to Jesus rather than all of the shadows and types of the Old Covenant which merely pointed to Jesus. The opposite of going “on to maturity” would be “laying again the foundation” of all of the things listed. These are all doctrines which were taught in the Old Testament. There is nothing wrong with these doctrines. They are all things which we believe. But they are only the foundation of what we believe. Unless we come to see Jesus as the One who is set upon that foundation, then the foundation is in itself of no benefit to us.

These were not merely baby believers who needed to grow. These were people who were being tempted to turn from the faith and to return to the law. These were Jewish converts who were returning to their Judaism. They were turning from Christ and now they were going back into the Temple and offering their sacrifices and trying to please God by keeping all of the Old Testament ordinances. Bing notes that “when the readers became Christians they had rejected the Jewish sacrifices and accepted the eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ. To go back and identify with Judaism is to publicly deny the benefits of Christ's sacrifice and even show implicit agreement that Christ deserved to die, thus the statement in 6:6: ‘since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame’” (2009).

These Jews are advised in Hebrews 6:1 to leave the elementary teaching about the Christ. This is not a call to abandon Jesus. Rather, it is a call to abandon the elementary teachings about Messiah and move on to the more advanced teachings of Messiah. These elementary teachings about the Messiah are the same as *the elementary principles of the oracles of God* described in Hebrews 5:12 (the same words are used in the Greek text). They are the types and shadows and the prophecies on the Old Testament. These all looked forward to Christ. They are the ABC's of the Messianic truths. MacArthur explains that “the elementary teaching about the Christ (Messiah) that the unbelieving Jews were to leave was the Old Testament teaching about Him” (1983:137).

These Jews who had initially come to Jesus and had then turned away were going

back to the elementary teachings of Messiah. They were going back to the Temple sacrifices and the rituals which pictured the Messiah who was to come. They need to leave these things. They need to move on. They need to graduate to “Jesus 101.” They need to go on to maturity. What kind of maturity is this? Is it spiritual maturity? Is it some kind of spiritual level that a Christian attains to by doing all of the right things like praying and witnessing and giving money and Bible study? No. It is simply a reference to the salvation which is found in Jesus Christ. This “maturity” is a description of the man who has come to Christ in faith. This will be seen when we come to chapter seven.

Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? (Hebrews 7:11).

The word “perfection” in this verse comes from the Greek root word τελιος (*telios*). It is the same word which is translated “mature” in Hebrews 5:14 and “maturity” here in Hebrews 6:1. Elsewhere, it has been translated “complete, finished, fulfilled.” The point of the passage is that perfection never came through the Levitical priesthood. Therefore, if you want to reach that perfection, you need to leave that Levitical priesthood behind and hold to that which is perfect and complete, Jesus Christ. We could chart it like this:

| Old Testament Symbols | Fulfillment in Jesus Christ |
|--|---|
| You have need that someone teach you again the elementary principles of the oracles of God (5:12). | By this time you ought to be teachers (5:12). |
| You have come to need milk (5:12). | You are not eating solid food (5:12). |
| Milk is for babies (5:13). | Solid food is for the mature (5:14). |
| Leave the elementary teachings about Christ (6:1). | Press on to maturity (6:1). |
| Approaching God on the basis of the Old Covenant. | Approaching God on the basis of the New Covenant. |

The Jews are to leave their past heritage of infancy behind and to hold to that which is the fulfillment and the completion of all of the Old Testament types and shadows. They are to leave behind their Old Testament sacrifices and their Old Testament rituals and they are to hold to Jesus. It is in this light that the readers are not to be *laying again a foundation* (6:1). Bruce speaks of this foundation:

“It was on a foundation already laid in the Old Testament... and one on which their way of life was already based, that these people had received the gospel. All these things were now given a fresh and fuller significance because of the coming of Christ into the world” (1990:143).

The foundation mentioned in Hebrews 6:1 speaks of the spiritual heritage enjoyed by the readers. That heritage is the foundation for the gospel. But, now that the gospel has come, it is time to leave the foundation and hold to the gospel. These Jews were doing just the opposite. They were abandoning the truth of the gospel and returning to the Old Testament foundation on which the gospel was built. This foundation was made up of a number of teachings. There are six mentioned here.

- ♦ Repentance from dead works.
- ♦ Faith toward God.
- ♦ Instruction about washings.
- ♦ Laying on of hands.
- ♦ The resurrection of the dead.
- ♦ Eternal judgment.

Lenski recounts this list and then summarily concludes that “all these genitives refer to basic Christian and not to the old Jewish teachings” (1998:176). But if we critically examine his conclusion, we might not be so quick to agree with him. Indeed, if we listen to Lenski’s own discussion on these terms, he might be enough to convince us that it is indeed the old Jewish teachings which are in view. For example, he asks, “why does the writer not say ‘faith in Christ’ instead of ‘faith based on (ἐπὶ) God’? Because he refers to faith that is based on God who spoke concerning Christ in the Old Testament. The Jews did not need another god; they needed faith in the God whom they knew, genuine trust in him and in the revelation of his Word” (1998:177).

In commenting about the reference to “instructions about baptisms,” Kistemaker points out that “the use of the plural provides sufficient reason to assume that he calls attention to washings other than Christian baptism” (2002:154). The writer to the Hebrews will use this same term (*baptismos*, βαπτισμος) once again when we come to Hebrews 9:10 where he speaks of the Mosaic law and its ordinances relating to “food and drink and various *washings*.”

Lenski himself points out that the laying on of hands “is the old symbolic act that dates far back into Judaism and is benedictional by praying for God’s blessings to descend upon the person indicated; it is at the same time symbolic of that very blessing” (1998:177). In the same way, the eschatological beliefs in a future resurrection and eternal judgment were rooted in the Old Testament. Daniel 12:2 provides the clearest example of the Old Testament teaching when it describes how “many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.”

Bruce correctly observes that “when we consider the ‘rudiments’ one by one, it is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item

could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community” (1990:139). These were not merely Christian teachings, though they were true of Christianity. They were Jewish teachings. MacArthur agrees that “there are not, as if often interpreted, elementary Christian truths that are to be abandoned in order to go on to maturity. They are Old testament concepts. To be sure, they pointed to the gospel, but they are not themselves part of the gospel” (1983:138).

Each of these six teachings was an Old Testament teaching. Each one of these teachings had a legitimate use. But each one is being used wrongly if it is used to detract attention away from Jesus Christ. There is an important lesson here. Anything which takes my attention away from Jesus Christ is wrong. It might be a good thing. But it is being wrongly used if it takes me away from the Lord. Even a thing from the Bible can be wrongly used if it takes me from the One who gave us the Bible. As we come to verse 4, we find ourselves embarking upon an extended sentence.

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Guthrie is helpful in laying out the structure of the passage as follows (1998:217):

| | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--|
| For (it is) impossible... | | |
| | The ones (descrip.) | once having been enlightened having tasted the heavenly gifts and having become partakers of the Holy Spirit and Having tasted the goodness of God’s word and the powers of the coming age |
| | (sequence) | and (then) having fallen away |
| ...to renew to repentance again | | |
| because they are | crucifying to themselves and exposing to ridicule | → the Son of God |

Now we are faced with a serious warning. We are given an extended description of those to whom this warning is directed. This is spoken to those who...

- ♦ Have once been enlightened.
- ♦ Have tasted of the heavenly gift.
- ♦ Have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit.
- ♦ Have tasted the good word of God.
- ♦ Have tasted the powers of the age to come.

We have already noted how those in the Calvinist and “once saved, always saved” camp often attempt to take these descriptions as referring to one who is close to salvation without actually having been saved. For example, Newell tries to make a contrast between those who drink of the water of life versus those who only taste of the heavenly gift, between those who are sealed with the Holy Spirit with those who are only made partakers of the Holy Spirit, with those who tasted that the Lord is gracious with those who merely tasted the good utterance of God. However, it seems to this writer that such attempts are based upon what is perceived to be a theological necessity rather than out of exegetical concerns.

The writer to the Hebrews is not hindered by such concerns. He does not have the context of the Calvinist/Arminian debates in mind. He is instead concerned with the context of those who had originally worshiped the Lord through the Old Testament sacrificial system. Dave Mathewson puts it this way:

“...the descriptions in vv. 4-5 are not to be pinned down to precise referents as most commentators attempt to do, but all refer more generally to the experience of the people in hearing the Gospel and experiencing the blessings of the new covenant within the context of the new covenant community. What the readers have experienced as part of the new Exodus community is to be interpreted in terms of what the first Exodus generation experienced on their way to the promised land” (1999).

This new community had always believed in a future coming messiah. But then they heard the gospel. They heard about Christ and the salvation that He brings. They trusted in Him as their Messiah, receiving the heavenly gift. They witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit and became a partaker of that power. They heard the preaching of the Word of God. They saw miracles. Then hard times came. In the midst of those hard times, they are now being tempted to abandon their faith and to return to the way things used to be. They are being tempted to return to the Old Testament sacrifices and the waiting for a future messiah.

When we read that it is *impossible to renew them again to repentance*, most interpreters have taken this repentance to refer to a return to the salvation that is found in Jesus Christ as though once a person had committed such an apostasy it would be impossible for such a person to return to Jesus. But the same term was used in verse 1 to describe the Old Testament teaching of “repentance from dead works.” Given the

context, we should understand the repentance here to be the same as that which was mentioned five verses earlier, the same repentance that was seen when Old Testament saints returned to God. Bruce points out that “the sectaries of Qumran... described themselves as ‘the repentant of Israel’; and they were by no means the only Jews to think and speak in such terms” (1990:140).

Here is the warning. Those who leave Jesus cannot go back to the Old Testament forms of worship because there is nothing left for them. They cannot go back to the Levitical Law and expect God to honor their worship because they have turned from the One who fulfilled the Law. They cannot go back to the Temple and offer a sacrifice, since they have already rejected the Ultimate Sacrifice. Guthrie correctly concludes that “repentance in 6:4-6 is ‘impossible’ because there is nowhere else to go for repentance once one has rejected Christ” (1998:220).

They again crucify to themselves the Son of God (6:6). This is spoken to Jews who are turning away from Jesus. They are trying to leave the cross and go back to the temple sacrifice. They are trying to leave the reality and go back to the type. In doing so, they are turning their backs upon Jesus. Less than forty years earlier, another generation of Jews had turned from Jesus. They had manifested their hatred of Jesus by crucifying Him. Now, these Jewish people are in danger of doing the very same thing. Lenski properly concludes that “they are repeating the awful act of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who crucified Jesus because he said he was the Son of God (1998:186).

Summary: This is written to Jews who have heard the gospel and have accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah. They are told that if they now reject the Messiah and fall away from the gospel, it is impossible for them to repent and return to the Law and thereby renew their old pre-cross relationship with God, since to do so would be to crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.

Bing correctly observes that “the sin in the warning of 6:4-8 seems to be the same sin in the warning of 10:26-39. The willful sin of 10:26 would be a deliberate abandonment of their confession of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice for a return to insufficient Jewish sacrifices. The author wrote to the Hebrews that ‘Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many’ (9:28), that ‘by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified’ (10:14), and that once forgiven ‘there is no longer an offering for sin’ (10:18). The Law offered them nothing since it looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ (10:1-10)” (2009). Bruce agrees that “the context here shows plainly that the willful sin which he has in mind is deliberate apostasy” (1990:148-9). Kistemaker makes an important distinction between this apostasy versus falling into sin:

“A distinction must be made at this point. The author speaks about falling away, not about falling into sin. For example, Judas fell away from Jesus and never returned to him; Peter fell into sin but soon afterward saw the resurrected Jesus. The two concepts (apostasy and backsliding) may never be confused. In 6:6, the author refers to apostasy; he has in mind the person who deliberately

and completely abandons the Christian faith” (2002:160).

The two verses that follow (6:7-8) give a graphic illustration that springs from the truth that has just been presented.

For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸ but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. (Hebrews 6:7-8).

These two verses form an illustration. They serve to illustrate the truths that have just been taught. The rain represents all of those things which God has sent in verses 4-5 to convince men of the truth of the salvation that Jesus provides. This rain has been offered to all. But it has a different effect in some areas than it has in others. In some areas, it bears fruit and is blessed by God. In other places, it bears thorns and is destroyed by God. The following chart shows both the illustration and that truth which is demonstrated by the illustration:

| Illustration | Truth that is Illustrated |
|---|---|
| Rain falls from heaven. | Truth has been given from heaven. |
| The rain lands on everything. | The gospel has been given to all men. |
| When the rain brings forth vegetation, it results in a blessing. | When the gospel is believed and brings salvation, it results in a blessing. |
| When rain brings forth thorns and thistles, it is worthless and ends up being burned. | When the gospel is not believed, the result is a curse. |

The warning is clear. The readers are being asked concerning their own ground. Are they holding fast to Jesus? Or will they abandon Him to chase the wind?

But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way.

For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints.

And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹² that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (Hebrews 6:9-12).

The writer to the Hebrews expresses his own personal assurance that his readers do not fit his earlier description of those who have fallen away from Jesus to return to the Law. He is assured both by the character of God working on their behalf as well as by the evidence exhibited in their own lives of their love of the Lord and the way in which that love has been manifested in their ministry to the saints. This assurance does not make the warning any less dire. Indeed, that warning will be repeated twice more before the epistle comes to a close. We have already noted what is essentially the same warning when we come to Hebrews 10:26.

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Once again, the context of the passage deals, not with merely the committing of sin in general, but with the specific sin of departing from Jesus to return to the formerly held Jewish religion. The issue in the immediate context is that it was becoming the habit of some to forsake the assembling together of the church (Hebrews 10:25). They were therefore exhorted to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” (Hebrews 10:23). The warning is that a departure from Christ does not allow one to return to the Old Testament sacrifices as an alternate method of approaching or appeasing God, but that once Christ has come, then there no longer in those Old Testament rituals remains a sacrifice for sins, but instead, any attempt to abandon Christ and return to those rituals will find that they have cut themselves off from God. If they reject the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, there is no other sacrifice available. The once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ is all that there is. If a person rejects the sacrifice of Christ, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin. This verse is not teaching as so many do that if one “willfully” sins after he is saved he will lose his salvation. In fact, the verse does the opposite. It is speaking to those who would turn away from the once and for all sacrifice of Christ. The Hebrews for whom this was written were in danger of trusting in the blood of bulls and goats to atone for their sins, and the writer was telling them that there was no more sacrifice other than that which the Messiah had accomplished.

At the same time, we cannot leave this warning without taking it and applying it to our own day. Most of us are not tempted to leave Christ in order to return to the Mosaic Law and to go and offer a sacrifice in the temple. But in this age of doubt and uncertainty, we are tempted to depart from Christ and to seek fulfillment in other ways and means. This passage is a warning that it is only in Christ that we shall find our way to God. That goes against the grain of 21st century Postmodern thinking. But it is in accord with the One who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6).

The final warning in the epistle to the Hebrews is given near the close of the epistle. When commentators have looked at the various warnings of Hebrews, they have at times seemed to ignore this one or placed it into a different category, as it has little to do with the earlier warnings. But I propose to show that it is indeed the same warning that has

been repeated throughout the epistle.

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶ that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷ For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears. (Hebrews 12:15-17).

Commentaries have regularly come to this passage and have depicted it as though it refers to some sort of emotional bitterness which a Christian ought to avoid. I agree that emotional bitterness is a bad thing and something to be avoided, but that is not what this passage is describing. The writer to the Hebrews has been speaking of the doctrinal poison of leaving Jesus to return to the Old Covenant way of life. The big idea throughout this book has been that Jesus is better. He is better than Moses and He provided a better sacrifice than the Old Testament sacrifices and He has instituted a new and a better covenant than was found in the old covenant of the law.

As he now warns against the danger of coming “short of the grace of God,” he is speaking of the same danger. It is the danger of coming short of the grace of God by abandoning Jesus in favor of the law; of abandoning the cross in favor of the Old Testament sacrifices. This is described here in terms of a root of bitterness. It is a poisonous root that is in danger of sprouting up in the church. The image of such a poisonous root is borrowed from the Old Testament. Moses used this image when he spoke to the Israelites of the danger of turning away from the Lord to serve the false idols of their neighbors.

Moreover, you have seen their abominations and their idols of wood, stone, silver, and gold, which they had with them); ¹⁸ lest there shall be among you a man or woman, or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there shall be among you a root bearing poisonous fruit and wormwood. (Deuteronomy 29:17-18).

Now the danger has come full circle. It is no longer the danger of worshiping idols of wood or stone or silver or gold. Now the danger is of making an idol of the law and turning away from the One to whom the law pointed. Partaking of this poisonous practice will be futile because it is impossible to find repentance and salvation in the Old Covenant once the New Covenant has come.

By leaving Jesus to return to the legal sacrifices of the Old Testament, the Hebrews to whom this epistle is directed were in danger of doing the same thing that Esau had once done. They are in danger of abandoning their birthright to gain a single meal. Their birthright is the Messiah. Jesus is that Jewish Messiah who is their proper birthright. He came to His own people, but those who were His own did not receive Him. They preferred the meal of their tradition and thus gave up the One who was their birthright.

Though most Christians today do not find themselves in exactly the same circumstances, that is, they are not normally facing the temptation to leave Jesus in order to return to the rituals of the Mosaic law, there is a more general application of the warnings of this epistle. It is found in the call to hold onto Jesus in the face of any and all temptations we might face to abandon Him.

There are many people who hear the gospel and are initially attracted by some aspect of it. Judas Iscariot was an example of this. He came for a time; he followed Jesus for a time, but then he fell away. When a person departs from the faith, they are showing their true colors. They are showing that they were never really children of God in the first place.

They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19).

There are people who hear the gospel and make a decision to accept it and who join the ranks of the Christians for a time, but who then turn from the faith and fall away. The reason that this takes place is because they were not really of the faith in the first place. They came, but they did not come to stay, and so, they departed. The good news is that we have a continuing hope of salvation. This is the note on which the writer of this epistle closes the section we have been studying: *We are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation (Hebrews 6:9)*. The writer feels certain that there is more to these Hebrew Christians than “thorns and thistles.” He knows that they are being tempted to depart from the faith, but he does not think that they have done so yet. He does not believe that they have fallen away. Why? Because he has witnessed the evidence of their salvation. The evidence of their inward faith is those outward actions that are produced by their faith.

For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name (Hebrews 6:10). These Hebrews had come to Christ. Since they had come to Christ, their faith had produced corresponding works in their life. These works were not the cause of their salvation. Rather, these works were the evidence of their salvation. God does not forget that evidence. He has promised to keep those who are His. They will not be permitted to fall away because He will hold on to them.

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